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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FWS BEGINS HARVESTING FEMALE SEALS OF PRIBILOF HERD

As a step toward maintenance of the Pribilof Islands fur seal herd at an optimum level--in terms of both biology and economics--the 1956 operations have been expanded to include the harvesting of some female seals, Director John L. Farley of the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior said today.

About 30,000 females are to be taken in the harvest, and the information which will be obtained this year relative to the time and conditions for taking females will give the Fish and Wildlife Service, which has the responsibility for the seal herd, the design of its future operations.

The Pribilof Islands fur-seal herd was near extinction in 1911 when pelagic sealing--harvest on the high seas--was banned by treaty. The herd numbered only 125,000 animals at that time, compared with 1,750,000 today. The first step in restoration of the herd following ratification of the 1911 Convention was to discontinue all land killing for five years. At that time killing of males was resumed, but was limited only to those surplus to the needs of the growing herd. All of the females were needed during this restoration period, but a part of the male population was surplus because these animals are polygamous, having harems of 50 or more females, although at birth they are present in equal numbers. By this method of management, approximately 2,000,000 surplus male seals were killed during the restoration. The herd now is fully restored.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials anticipate that killing 30,000 cow seals a year will relieve the congested rookeries and reduce pup mortality. As a result of the increased pup survival, because half of them are males, there will soon be more three and four year males in the herd and a larger harvest possible without any decline in the herd's productivity. In short, an added harvest is substituted for annual mortality.

Service officials intend to pay particular attention to the size and condition of the herd during the taking of the females. The harvest of females, the first such harvest in nearly 50 years, began with the regular season--mid-June--and continued until August 15. Operations will be resumed early in September and will continue until mid-October.

Since it has been nearly 50 years since American sealers have taken female pelts, little is known about the time when the quality of these skins is best, or the best conditions under which the females should be harvested. Records are being kept on a day-to-day basis on the condition of the pelts, the condition of the rookeries, the difficulties encountered in taking the cows, the effect of weather, the effect of late season operations as well as comments and suggestions on harvest operations. Each female skin will be marked in such a way that the date of taking can be determined at any stage of the processing. In this way it will be possible to learn the periods at which the skins are at their top value.

The male pelt is best when the animal is three or four years old. Since the old bulls maintain harems of between 25 and 100 cows, and drive the younger males away from the herd, the age group wanted for harvest is automatically segregated. The harvesting policy of 65,000 males annually permits about 10 percent of the younger bulls to reach breeding age--the seventh year--and establish harems.

As far as is known now, the female pelt is good at any mature age. This considerably widens the harvest age of the seal herd. The life span of the fur seal is about 19 years, and the female begins to bear young at about three years. The female seals arrive on the Pribilofs early in June after almost a year at sea. The old males precede them by two or three weeks and the younger seals follow them by a week or two. The pups are born shortly after the females arrive at the rookeries. Each has but a single pup--average weight 12 pounds--in any one year. The nursery season for the new pup is also the new mating season.

The Pribilof Islands in Bering Sea are five in number, the largest being St. Paul Island. It is 14 miles in length. St. George Island, 40 miles away, is second in size--about 10 miles in length.

Records show that before 1834 the Russians, who at that time owned Alaska and the Pribilofs, took 2,000,000 seal pelts. Because of the decrease in the size of the herd, the Russians placed restrictions on the harvest and from 1834 until the United States took over the Islands with Alaska in 1867, only 600,000 pelts were taken.

From 1870 until 1910 the United States permitted the land killing of seals on a lease basis. During the first 20-year period the taking of 100,000 pelts a year was permitted. The total harvest for that period was 1,927,377 pelts which brought the United States Government \$6,020,152 in revenue. During the next 20 years there was a sharp decrease in numbers of seals and the take was only 342,651 pelts for which the Government received \$3,453,844. In addition, many thousands of seals

were killed during this period by small vessels operating on the high seas without regard for the future of the resource. Pelagic sealing was wasteful, since many killed animals were lost, and since the killing was indiscriminate.

Then in 1911, the pelagic sealing was banned and land killing was discontinued for five years. Since then the harvesting of the Pribilof Islands' seals has been exclusively on land as a United States Government responsibility, administered first by the Secretary of Commerce and now by the Secretary of the Interior.

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